THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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The Liberal Arts

(Editor's Note: The following letter from Professor Werner was published in the *New York Times* and aroused widespread comment. Since it was cut here and there in its published form, the author and the *Times* permit us to reprint it here with excisions restored.)

To the Editor of
The New York Times:

I was surprised to find a New York Times editorial of Dec. 30 discussing liberal arts education in wartime in terms of "dallying with Elizabethan poetry or the Homeric epics while civilization is at stake."

May I enter first a minor demurral that study is not "dallying" and that even some soldiers find relief between battles in Shakespeare and Homer?

But more important is the fact that a liberal arts curriculum is not simply the equivalent of literary classics or even of more general culture. After many nineteenth-century upheavals a liberal arts course now contains the following items: mathematics; foreign languages; English composition; literature; the social sciences and history; a bloc comprising philosophy, psychology, ethics and religion; and a smattering of supplementary or escape courses which are "appreciations" of art, music, natural science, calisthenics, and what not. Ignoring this last miscellany of electives, we have six blocs of information. The problem confronting our Army-Navy "educators" is whether any of these six studies is not essential in wartime for college men who almost inevitably will become commissioned officers or technicians.

(1) Mathematics: Nobody wants to drop this. Of our projected 7,500,000 army, one-third are to be in the air service. Elsewhere on ships, on jeeps, in the artillery, mathematics is necessary.

(2) Foreign languages: All our fighting is being done abroad, where natives and enemies and many of our allies speak foreign languages. The fall of France led to a silly drop in the study of French, but now our largest fighting force needs just that language for efficient operation in Africa. German, an enemy language, is needed both for dealings with the enemy ("military German") and for research in chemistry and metallurgy.

(3) English composition: The Selective Service authorities acknowledged the value of English when they barred draftees for illiteracy. Even now illiterates are drafted only in small, teachable numbers. Military officers need a college grade of English to read technically phrased Army orders and manuals, and civilians need it to understand rationing rules, tax

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Post-War English

(Editor's note: These three continue a series of letters from administrators and others, on College English after the war.)

From the President and the Dean of Humanities of Stanford University

Personally I have a feeling that the teaching of English in our colleges and universities from now on forward will develop some new approaches, that less attention will be paid to the historical phases of English literature and more will be paid to the relationships of literature to social, political and philosophical development.

I put your question to Professor John W. Dodds of our English Department, whose comments I think are right to the point. Professor Dodds is now Dean of our School of Humanities. He states that, if he were to answer a query such as you put to me, he would reply about as follows:

"There has been a good deal of unnecessary worry and lamentation on the part of English teachers lest their subject, so severely curtailed by the war, should go into a permanent decline in the post-war period. It is regrettable that under the stresses of war, English, like the other Humanities, should have to suffer temporary eclipse; for there is much in the study of literature which is of direct moral and spiritual value in times of disaster. Nevertheless the current lack of emphasis on cultural subjects is in the very nature of things, and should not be a cause for gloom. To fear that the college interest in English studies will disappear permanently from the American scene is to display a curious lack of faith in the validity of the subject which English professors profess. If that subject is a good one and has lasting values it will come back stronger than ever. If it cannot be shown to have those values, then it deserves to disappear.

"These war years, then, should be a time for heart-searching on the part of English professors. For after the war English studies will share with the other Humanities the need for some sort of reorientation. I am not sure that in the long run the shock of war will not prove a healthy stimulus for many academic subjects. In normal times dry rot is likely to attack the most inherently vigorous subjects, and wise professors will use these days for a sort of candid stock-taking of their traditional values. What is worth preserving they will cling to as to life itself; what is seen to be sterile they will get rid of as quickly as possible. The study of English, which I take to mean the creative and imaginative understanding of man and man's life—just as significant as the scientific understanding of life—is profoundly important to the welfare of our civilization. It is up to the professors of English to see that such a study continues to have living value and that it is presented in a form which has real meaning for the young men and women who are exposed to it. If such a cultural vigor can be resurrected and maintained the Humanities as a whole have nothing to fear from the enemies of light."

—Ray Lyman Wilbur
John W. Dodds

A Literature Curriculum for General Education by the President of Knox College

Much of the teaching of literature in our schools and colleges in the past has been as a form of history or philology. The first emphasis has led to the selection of readings on the basis of historical importance—"Gorboduc" because it was the earliest English tragedy, or Richardson's "Pamela" because it began the English novel—rather than on the safer general educational foundation of intrinsic interest, revelation of human nature, and sheer enjoyment. The second warped approach has meant that classroom instruction and study stressed the grammatical analysis of Shakespeare, or the linguistic origins of Chaucer, or the esoteric allusions of John Donne, rather than reading for understanding of content and appreciation of beauty or cleverness. As a result, most of our high school and college graduates have a distinct aversion for "literary masterpieces", and confine their own leisure reading almost exclusively to the newspapers, the popular magazines, detective fiction, and an occasional book-of-the-month, without making any connection whatever between their present reading and the history of literature.

Realizing this deplorable condition, and believing that the function of general education, whether for soldiers or for civilians, for in-school or out-of-school consumption, is to provide knowledges, skills, habits, and attitudes which will function throughout life's daily activities, and not end with formal education, we have built the following curriculum in literature to produce these results:

(1) Enjoyment of literature as a means of enriching personal life.

(2) Deepening understanding of human nature, aspirations, and social relationships; and

(3) Developing the habit of "good reading" of materials of more than ephemeral value.

—Carter Davidson.

Cultivate the Seed

How can we justify our teaching, we college instructors, facing daily as we do, those who will soon fight our battles for us? What can "English" offer to the boys who come in to say goodby?

"I'm joining up."

"Oh, good. What branch?"

"The marines."

"Fine," you say. "If I were a young man, that's what I'd like to be."

"Yes, I'll see action. That's what I want. But"—and those clear eyes that have passed the marine corps test look straight at you—"I don't know how I'm going to feel when I kill my first man."

You tell him what you think, simply and unsentimentally; and after he goes out with your inevitable "good luck" following him—you wonder. You have initiated him and others like him into the mysteries of organization and sentence forms. You have read poetry with them and prose. They sit quietly, joining in the class discussion, but wondering what it will be to kill a man. Have organization and sentence forms, have Shakespeare and Browning, anything to say to our young men and women of today?

Nearly all authorities seem to agree that composition justifies itself in the war program; perhaps reading for comprehension does also. But does literature?

A few weeks ago I listened to Erika Mann. Hitler did England a kindness, she said, in bombing London; for there was an object lesson in Nazi tactics. Broken bodies and shattered buildings spoke a message that none could fail to hear. And she wondered about us here in America, protected by our great oceans and men who sail the seas. Would we—could we—understand what this war and the peace to follow demand without an object lesson in terror?

As I listened to her, it seemed to me that she had answered my question; for surely the especial quality of ltierature is its ability to arouse imagination. Galsworthy, I believe, speaks of the motive power of imaginative sympathy. Through reading this can be cultivated. "Mother Savage" arouses a sympathy that helps interpret the plight of Poles and Czechs and French, to free whom is one of our reasons for fighting this war. "To Lucasta" says in different words "there's a job to do." "Patterns" echoes the cry in the heart of many a pig-tailed college girl, her third finger proudly bearing the emblem of her love.

I have watched with pleasure the rise of the gremlins and their kin. No twentieth-century youth believes in fairies; to him a fairy ring

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Editorial

Planning for a post-war world is contagious. Everyone is doing it, including the educators. Everyone is planning for education after the war, including non-educators. This perhaps is as it should be. In 1919 we found ourselves facing a post-war world without forethought. All of the half-baked notions and the crack-pot schemes and devices, and the dreams and the visions were thrust suddenly upon men's minds and produced confusion. If such raw material had been fed the public while the long war was going on, at least some of the digestive process might have been accomplished. But now some time may elapse before we find ourselves in the midst of a post-war world, if our steadier-minded commentators are right, and we can be playing with various proposals in our minds and doing some work of elimination.

Nearly every great educational foundation and the larger educational societies and at least five departments of the government, including the Office of Price Administration, have committees at work planning for post-war education, and each committee is undoubtedly made up of individuals who have their own pet notions. The War Department has been planning an educational program for men now in the armed forces and for a continuation of it after they return to civil life. Nearly all of these schemes and patterns include some program in English at the higher levels of formal education. It would be interesting to know how many of our [illegible] is now in process of grinding. The "News Letter" refuses to be left outside this Athenian market-place. Perhaps when the post-war winnowing occurs, some grains of wheat may trace their origin to these informal pages.

The Second American Congress on General Semantics was held at the University of Denver two years ago. Advance announcements said: "The work of the Congress will stress the possibilities of a new general methodology of evaluation as foundation for cultural integration in our time. In the three general sessions, addresses by Korzybski and other speakers will deal with problems of reconstruction in a democratic society. The papers on applications of General Semantics and related subjects presented in sectional meetings covering the various fields of education, psychosomatic therapy and other human affairs, will serve to demonstrate the generality and workability of the methodology and to indicate the possibilities of its further applications."

In the two years which have passed since that announcement, the word "semantics", coined long ago and new to most of us, has come to occupy much space in textbooks and pedagogical vocabularies. Words are the symbols of ideas, and the effort to use a new word engenders thought, and thinking is good for us teachers. Also it is good for Old Truths to be dressed up now and then in shiny new words.

But we are getting too old to take some of this as seriously as we should. We have read so many labels on bottles since our youth that we have developed a reaction to many of them which is a mixture of waiting-to-be-shown, and of amusement, and of sincere admiration for any man who has the power to build up a loyal following, and finally, of a realization that every good mixture to be effective at all should have in it some ingredient that is really curative.

"School and Society" for December 6th contains the report of a study by John M. Stalneker on 'Sex Differences in the Ability to Write.' The data for the inquiry are derived from the examinations in English of the College Entrance Examination Board, and many columns of figuring reach this conclusion: "The girls appear to secure higher scores than the boys. . . . The superiority of the girls is not common to most of the Board's examinations. When controls are made on the type of school from which the candidates come and the ratings of the candidates on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the difference in favor of the girls persists. Even breaking down the score into its several component parts does not show any one part responsible. Girls in the type of culture from which these groups are drawn seem to show a superior ability in writing English". So what?

ondary school teachers has been noted before in the "News Letter", but that report is as fully deserving of attention from teachers of English at the college undergraduate level as from any other group. It is characterized by sanity and a disregard of habitual teaching methods based solely upon tradition. In another column we quote from only one of its many findings, and recommend the entire report to the thoughtful consideration of college English teachers.

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Creative Writing

If every secondary school pupil were a potential imaginative writer, the conception of writing in the schools as fundamentally creative would be better founded. But such a notion needs only to be stated to become absurd. All secondary school pupils are not in any sense prospective professional writers; they are not all potential journalists, let alone dramatists or poets. If they were, society would not know what to do with them, and they would be destined to miserable lives. The creative conception of writing may well contain disguised vocational assumptions of the most dangerous kind, which can only arouse cruel disappointment in the later lives of pupils who take them seriously.

But it also contains, if it is not carefully thought through, a misconception of the very nature of the creative. This word has done much damage in educational discussion. It is used in a riddling sense to beg, not to solve, important questions. The notion that all imaginative creation is free and spontaneous, that it is not amenable to formal discipline and does not require trained intellectual faculties of analysis and reason, fundamentally distorts the truth. The notion that a well-presented and thoroughly thought out exposition is not creative and does not call upon the power of imagination is equally false. Exposition without insight and imagination is as defective as spontaneous expression without form or coherence. The wise teacher will conclude that the needs of emotional and personal development can be recognized to the full without giving them the sole or even the central place in education. Pupils should have every opportunity to express their emotions and vivid responses when these really press for utterance; but we need not conclude that they have fulfilled their whole educational duty when they have produced poems, essays, or stories that serve fundamentally as outlets of personal expression.

—The Training of Secondary School Teachers. Report of a Joint Committee of the Faculty of Harvard College and of the Graduate School of Education. pp. 69-70. 1942.

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Gleaned From the Mail

Dear Editor:

"evaluating" the writers of their own time—contemporary writers.

By what means are they to evaluate? By their own Freshman feelings, which will change very much before they are forty? I wish your "News Letter" could more often accent the fact that it is necessary to have standards—accepted standards—before one can "evaluate" anything. We do not trust our senses as to the temperature; we look at the thermometer. I hope you can get permission from the Yale Review to publish in the "News Letter" the following extract from Andre Maurois' "The Art of Reading", published by them several months ago in the Yale Review.

"Reading, like all work, has its rules. First: a perfect knowledge of a few writers and a few subjects is more valuable than a superficial one of a great many. The fine points of a piece of writing are seldom apparent at first reading. In youth, one should search among books as one searches the world for friends, and once these friends are found, chosen, and adopted, one must go into retirement with them. Intimacy with Montaigne, Saint-Simon, Balzac, or Proust would be enough to enrich one's whole life.

Second: in one's reading, great writers of the past must be given most attention. Of course, it is both natural and necessary to be familiar with those of the present, for it is among them that we are likely to find friends who have our own anxieties and requirements. But let us not submerge ourselves in a sea of insignificant books; masterpieces are already so numerous that we can never know them all. Let us have faith in the choice of past centuries. A man may be wrong; so may a generation; but humanity does not make mistakes. Homer, Tacitus, Shakespeare, and Molliere surely deserve their fame. We give them some preference over writers who have not undergone the test of time."

How true it is that in art a "period may be wrong, a century may be wrong, but humanity is not wrong." Young men may be rather bored by the great classics when they read them in college. But, years afterward, those same masterpieces come back to them with tremendous force and truth, and sometimes console them in dark hours. You remember at the beginning of Stevenson's "The Ebb Tide" the beachcomber who often got great comfort out of his Virgil when he didn't have the price of a dinner.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote:

"For it is the destiny of those grave, restrained, and classic writers, with whom we make enforced and often beneficial acquaintance at school to pass into the blood and become native in the memory; so that a phrase of Virgil speaks not of Mantua, but of English places and the student's own irrevocable youth".

—A "Contemporary Writer"

The "Yale Review" has generously

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Dear Members of the CEA:

No doubt most members of the College English Association read the "Saturday Review of Literature". None of us, I think, should miss reading "Education Goes to War" by Ordway Tead (March 6, 1943). Mr. Teed calls attention to the gravest danger that besets humanity, for what will it profit a man if he win the war and lose his soul, his sense of moral direction and human values—or, worse yet, never develop such a sense?

When college administrations run colleges for business purposes rather than for the purposes of educating the youth to the best possible way of life, when they are more interested in the money they can get from the army than they are in the quality of education they give young inductees, it makes one fearful for the whole future of humanity—democracy or no democracy.

Mr. Tead analyzes the situation well and calls to educators to be "loyal to their faith and the fighters loyal to their function." As he says: "We can be at once technically competent to win a war and humanly alert to win the peace." Civilization is not something that can be put on a shelf for a generation and then picked up again as a living thing. It dies if it is not lived. Our task is to preserve and further civilization and win a war technically at the same time.

—May Overton,
South Dakota State College.

Editor's Note:

Personal letters from impersonal advertisers are pleasant occurrences in the routine of mail opening and they have come oftener than past editorial experience had led us to expect. Here are two samples:

". . . We feel that the informal nature of your 'News Letter' is its best asset—at least, from the advertiser's point of view, for it is much more likely to be read. We have admired its lively and interesting tone for some time, and shall probably continue to advertise occasionally, when we have books which seem to be particularly suitable. We would appreciate your sending us a style sheet showing the types which are available.

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Sincerely yours"

NOTICE

Presidential Message

My dear Editor:

Since in your own words the CEA is primarily an association of those interested in the best possible teaching of English literature, our function and purpose in the next few years should be plain. For certainly the humanities, and perhaps particularly literature, are under attack and are going to be under attack until we successfully defend ourselves.

If it were merely a question of the place in the curriculum of humanistic studies, we might hope that the inevitable reaction against too much technology which will come after the war would take care of the problem. But the attack goes further and both openly and underground is being made upon the vitality and effectiveness of the teaching of literature in all grades of education.

If our association had not been formed earlier, it or some equivalent association would have to be formed now in order to give a common meeting ground for a very large number of teachers and scholars, who know that literature is vital and can be made effective, and who are as eager to discuss ways and means to defend the profession. It has been far more successful than its enemies are willing to admit.

Yours very truly,
Henry Seidel Canby.

CEA Sponsors a Book

Members of the Association who attended the Indianapolis meeting may remember that it voted to sponsor an anthology on democracy, and appointed a committee with myself as chairman to see the undertaking through. A little later a notice or two appeared in the "News Letter" asking for suggestions as to the contents (which, let me say in passing, brought forth some welcome responses)—and then silence. Over a year has passed and the book is only now being announced; why?

The proposal for the book specified that it should be short; not more than fifty or seventy-five thousand words; that it should be mainly literature of power, not documents or exposition; and that it should emphasize democracy in general, not especially America or the present crisis. The selections were to be such that when taught simply as literature and not as propaganda, they would communicate democratic ideas. And finally all the selections were to be of such importance that every American could properly be expected to know them.

The committee, which included Dr. Ola E. Winslow of Goucher, Professor Donald F. Connors of Fordham, with Professor Howard Lowry as an ex-officio member, has aided in meeting editorial problems as they arise. Publication will be at the earliest possible date. Any profits accruing from the book will be divided between the publication fund of the CEA and some national war purpose.

The tentative title of the volume is now under discussion; with "Democratic Ideals in Poetry and Prose" as a sub-title. It should serve as a collection of readings especially adapted to college composition classes.

There are ten sections of mixed verse and prose. Exposition is kept at a minimum, and is mainly in the form of single sentences and short paragraphs. Some of the material is admittedly journalistic, but of interest and significance now. The first section concerns the basic idea on which democracy rests: the worth and dignity of man as man. The second emphasizes individualism, the third and fourth those principles of society which democracy assumes — justice, tolerance, and especially freedom. The fifth section presents the other most important facet of democracy—cooperation and fellowship. The sixth cites as examples of democracy the traditional figures of the pioneers and the immigrants, the seventh the ordinary average citizen, the eighth Lincoln as the typical figure. The ninth section emphasizes milestones in the struggle for freedom from Thermopolae to the last war, and the tenth looks to the future. In brevity and in plan the book is unlike any other anthology. To me it has a thrilling crescendo of interest, which will, I hope, be shared by the student. In any case it cannot fail, I think, to promote discussion and to stimulate a sense of the importance of what is at stake in this war.

—George Reynolds,
Univ. of Colorado.

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